



2004-2005 Rhode Island Furbearer Harvest Report Rhode Island Division of Fish and Wildlife



For 2004-2005, a total of 86 trapping licenses were sold in Rhode Island, a 65 % increase in license sales from the previous year. Approximately half of the trapping licenses sold are related to the nuisance wildlife industry exclusively. The attached furbearer harvest figures reflect only those furbearers harvested recreationally, (i.e. during the open season) and not those taken outside the open season under nuisance wildlife permits. Fur harvest figures are based on mandatory fur harvest reports which, by state law all trappers (i.e. anyone purchasing a trapping license) must return at the end of the trapping season.

Beaver

During the 2004-2005 beaver trapping season a total of 88 beaver were taken, a 67 % decrease from the previous season total and continuing a trend of up and down harvests over the past several seasons. Weather conditions, pelt prices, season dates, and other factors affect trapper effort and harvest totals. A total of 24 beaver permits were issued for the 2004-2005 season with 11 permit holders (46%) successfully taking beaver during the open season. Eighty-two percent of the beaver harvested were taken from private land. Pelt prices for beaver, based on the February 2005 Rhode Island Trappers Association fur auction sales, decreased slightly from last year, averaging out at \$16.76. A new state record for largest beaver taken in Rhode Island was established in 2004-2005, with a 65 pound male taken by Sam Piccolo in Westerly. This eclipses the previous record of 62 pounds held by Harold West and Joe Zbyrowski. Although beaver have been known to exceed 80 pounds in other parts of North America, beavers in excess of 60 pounds are not common in Rhode Island.

The proposed season dates for the 2005-2006 season will be November 1, 2005 through February 28, 2006 on private lands and December 1, 2005 through February 28, 2006 on state management areas. Beaver permits, which are required to trap beaver, are available at no charge at the Division of Fish and Wildlife's Great Swamp Field Headquarters.

The Division of Fish and Wildlife conducted surveys for active and active beaver colonies within the Quinebaug and Hunt River watersheds during the winter of 2004 – 2005. The Rhode Island portion of the Quinebaug watershed is located in the western part of the state and is part of a much larger area that includes part of central Massachusetts and eastern Connecticut. It includes portions of six Rhode Island towns. The Quinebaug River does not flow through Rhode Island but one of the main tributaries, the Moosup River, has its headwaters in this state. The first active beaver colony documented in Rhode Island following an absence of perhaps 200 years was found in the Moosup River system in 1976. During the survey period, a total of 37 active colony sites were located, with an additional 64 sites were determined to be inactive, in that there was evidence of past beaver activity but at the time of the survey beaver were not using the site.

The Hunt River watershed covers approximately 15,445 acres and drains into Narragansett Bay. It includes portions of seven Rhode Island towns. Reports of beaver

activity within the watershed go back to the 1980's, including reports of unauthorized introductions. To date, beavers have not become well established within the watershed. During the survey period only one active colony was located, with one additional inactive site found.

Fisher

During the 2004 fisher season a total of 55 fisher were taken, which includes several road-kills salvaged by fisher permit holders. This is a slight increase from the previous season total of 52 fisher. Sixty-five percent of the fisher taken during the season were females. Based on cementum aging analysis 31 (58 %) of the total harvest were juveniles. In addition to collecting teeth for aging analysis and ovaries from females to determine reproductive potential, stomach contents were also examined with results shown in the attached tables. The season dates for the 2005 season will be the same as last year, from December 1, 2005 through December 22, 2005 with a bag limit of four. Fisher pelts must be tagged by the Division of Fish and Wildlife. As in the past, participating trappers must submit the complete skinned carcass to receive a pelt tag. Fisher trapping permits, which are required in addition to a current trapping license, are available at the Great Swamp Field Headquarters.

Muskrat

The muskrat harvest for the 2004-2005 season (197) showed some improvement from the previous season total (177) that was the lowest recorded total since mandatory fur harvest reports were adopted. The low harvest numbers are part of an ongoing trend that started in the early 1980's and partly the consequence of decreased trapper effort and muskrat population levels lower than those experienced prior to the 1980's. Average pelt prices received by trappers at Rhode Island Trappers Association fur auctions decreased for the third consecutive year.

Mink

The 2004-2005 mink harvest of 80 mink was an increase of 40% from the previous season total of 57 mink. This was the first time since 1996 that the harvest has reached or exceeded 80 and only the third time since 1981. Pelt prices also increased with average pelt prices paid at the Rhode Island Trappers Association fur auction exceeding \$15.00. A total of 65 mink were collected from trappers or as roadkills for the ongoing joint study with the U.S. EPA on mercury and other environmental contaminants. Results of the first four years of the study are being prepared for publication. Although future testing of additional specimens is dependent on uncertain funding, we again would request that trappers voluntarily submit skinned carcasses for the study during the upcoming season. Additional specimens are needed from northern Rhode Island particularly the Blackstone watershed and Aquidneck Island.

Legislation

The 2005 legislative session has produced several bills that would effect trapping and furbearer management in the state. House bill H-5533 would prohibit the DEM from issuing special permits to landowners for the use of foothold traps to abate problems caused by predators for which other methods have not proven effective. This is the only

circumstance in which foothold traps can be used in Rhode Island. A bill of this type has been brought before the legislature almost every year. Following testimony from members of the Rhode Island Trappers Association and the Division of Fish and Wildlife in opposition to the proposal the House Committee on Environment and Natural Resources tabled the bill.

House Bill H 6046, if enacted would prohibit the use of all “body-crushing” type traps in Rhode Island. It is intended to prohibit the use of body-gripping or conibear type traps but broadly defined it would also include mouse and rat traps. If passed, this bill would severely limit the harvest of furbearers for traditional, recreational uses as well as limit the ability to trap furbearers and other mammals that are creating nuisances, depredation, and public health and safety problems. It would severely limit the ability of the DEM to manage beaver and other furbearers. As of yet the bill has not yet been scheduled for a hearing before the House Committee on Environment and Natural Resources.

Rabies

In 2004, the Rhode Island Department of Health tested a total of 373 wild and domestic mammals for the rabies virus. Rabies infection was confirmed in 45 animals in the state for the year, for an overall positivity rate of 12%. Striped skunks accounted for 28 of the cases (62% of total), followed by 9 raccoons (20%), 5 bats (11%), and three housecats (7%). Care should be taken when handling or skinning furbearers; particularly target species such as raccoons, skunks and foxes. Wear rubber gloves when skinning and do not skin animals that appeared sick or were behaving abnormally.

Miscellaneous

Species specific traps were permitted for use for the first time in 2004. They are designed as live restraining devices used to capture raccoons. Initial feedback from trappers who used them was positive overall. What constitutes a legal species specific trap in Rhode Island is defined in the hunting and trapping regulations.

On April 5, 2005 a road-killed male pine marten was picked up in South Kingstown, a first for that species in the state. There are no known recent or historical records for Rhode Island. The nearest populations occur in northern Maine, Vermont, and New Hampshire, as well as the Adirondack region of New York. The origin of the marten is unknown, it could be a dispersing young male or hitched a ride somehow or have been intentionally released. It is not likely to be an indication of an established population.

Rhode Island Fish and Wildlife has been asked to participate in a genetics study of gray fox being conducted by a researcher at Colby College in Maine. We will be asking trappers to voluntarily contribute muscle tissue samples from any trapped or road-killed gray foxes. Tissue samples should be marble-sized and can be stored frozen until delivered to Fish and Wildlife. Date of capture, sex, town, and collector’s name should be recorded with each sample.

Rhode Island trappers have in the past been very helpful in providing sighting reports and specimens non-furbearing mammals in the state. Over the past several years I have collected valuable specimens of long-tail weasels, southern flying squirrels, star-nosed moles and others from local trappers. The vouchers provide valuable information on distribution of some of our lesser-known mammals. I would be interested in collecting

whole specimens of weasels, flying squirrels, moles, bats, shrews or other small mammals whenever possible.

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